[Robert Joseph Gantt]

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Life History

Title: ROBERT JOSEPH GANTT

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Name of person interviewed Robert Joseph Gantt

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Occupation Attorney

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“I'm not making a lot of money, but I live well, huh? Financially, I don't guess I would be called a successful lawyer, but I've never been hungry, and my home is my own, huh? I owe a little money, but it's not pressing. I don't have to worry like some people I know, huh? ”

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Robert Joseph Gantt, who, in point of service, is the third oldest member of the Spartanburg bar, is a typical country lawyer. There is no “put on” about Bob Gantt. He's just “the judge” to all of his acquaintances in Spartanburg, and has received the title during all the years since he served as a city magistrate in Spartanburg for twelve years, beginning in 1905. He's “plain as an old shoe,” if you please, and he knows it, and, furthermore, likes it!

No, he doesn't make much money, to-be true, but he doesn't worry. On some days he makes as much as $50—“when business is good”— and most of the time he is satisfied if he picks up a case that will net him $5 or $10 for his services. During the present hard times, he will average $30 a week , sometimes more, most often less. The estimate is his own. There are days, however, when no money is forthcoming, and clients are scarce. He makes an C10 - 1/31/41 - [S.C.?] 2 persistent effort to secure all of his legal fee from his client in advance, but failing in this, he will ask for at least half of it as a “down payment.” If he fails in that effort, then he will consent to wait until his client has a pay day, that is, if he is convinced that his client has a habit of receiving weekly or monthly pay envelopes. To reach Judge Gantt's office you go up a flight of stairs that give with every step taken, enter a dark hallway, and turn to the first door on the right. [His office?] is not the type you would expect to find being used by a man of his [acknowledged ability?]. Seven cabinets of law books, many of them of much value, almost crowd him out of the window into West Main Street. You can see that the ceiling was once covered with yellow paper, and that the walls were at one time calcimined in green, long ago faded. He [??] uses an old walnut desk that he says is over sixty years old, and it is scattered over with papers. Nothing is arranged. It is a picture of a country editor's desk. The dust has settled on most of the papers thereon. Hanging directly over his desk is a framed picture of Senator J.L.M. Irby, of South Carolina, wearing a campaign hat. Nearby, a frame holds the diploma Judge Gantt received at the University of Georgia in the nineties, but it is necessary for you to part the dust with your fingers before being able to read it. Apparently, there is no janitor service in the building he occupies, or at least, not for his single room.

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In a corner of the room is a small sink, which is badly in need of washing. Above the sink is nailed a ten-cent mirror. A soiled towel hangs from a nail nearby. On a shelf to the left of the wash basin are two glasses, a box of soda, and a large bottle of kidney pills. There is [a?] coal bin in the room, and a drum of kerosene, partially hidden by a curtain. The room is heated by a small laundry heater. A pan of water is on top of the heater. There is a trash can beside his desk that is forever empty ; , since the uncarpeted 3 carpeted floor is used for unwanted papers. Occasionally he sweeps out his office, but only when he feels that he has to in order to clear a path for his own entrance. There are three chairs, one of them being an old-fashioned rocker more than forty years old which he says he made himself.

If you ask him the age of the old law books on the shelves, he will tell you that many of them are over a hundred years old. Then, he will get up from his rocker, go to a cabinet and hand you a book that is covered with dust, titled, “The Symboleography—Newly Corrected and Amended and Verie Much Enlarged in All Severall Treaties. Printed for the Companie of Stationers-1618. Cum Privilegio.” Judge Gantt tells you that he could, if need be, sell this particular book for quite a sum, but that he will not do so “unless the wolf comes to the door, huh?”

Judge Gantt was born at Elbertan, Georgia, on May 15, 1872, the son of T, Larry Gantt, a country newspaper editor, and founder of the [Oglethorpe Echo?] at Lexington, Georgia. His father was once a power in Georgia politics, and after he came to Spartanburg in 1891 to establish The Piedmont Headlight, he became a staunch supporter of Ben Tillman, and remained so until his death in 1933. For years his influence was felt in politics in the Palmetto State.

Practically all of Judge Gantt's boyhood was spent in Georgia. The family moved to Athens, Ga., when Larry Gantt's purchased the Athens Banner and the Southern Watchman, combining the two papers under the name of the Banner-Watchman. Judge Gantt had attended and graduated from the University of Georgia, and he came with his father to Spartanburg when the latter began publication of the Piedmont Headlight.

Shortly after coming to Spartanburg, however, young Gantt, through the friendship of his father with Hoke Smith, of Georgia, then Secretary of the interior Department in Grover Cleveland's cabinet, received an appointment to the Interior Department at Washington. 4 His salary was $100 per month. Gantt found that his closest friend in the Interior Department was Josephus Daniels, of Raleigh, N.C., afterwards editor of the Raleigh News & Observer, and later Secretary of the Navy in the cabinet of Woodrow Wilson, war-time President. Mr. Daniels was at that time chief clerk of the Interior Department. Judge Gantt says that his friendship with Daniels has lasted through the years, and he takes every opportunity he has to see his former “boss,” as he refers to Daniels.

Judge Gantt remained in the Interior Department until the election of President McKinley, and then he was offered, and accepted, the position of private secretary to Senator Irby, his salary being $125 per month. During the period that he was with Senator Irby, he took a law course at night at Georgetown University. Upon his graduation he was nineteenth in a class of over two hundred students. When he had attended the University of Georgia, he had hopes of becoming a civil engineer after graduation, and he received a degree in engineering.

“I sometimes wonder,” he recalled, “if it wouldn't have been better for me to have become a civil engineer rather than to practice law. But it's too late to change now; if I wanted to.”

After his graduation in law at Georgetown University, Judge Gantt returned to Spartanburg to hang out his shingle in 1896, and for forty-six years he has been a resident of the “Hub City.” He says that although he is a Georgian by birth, he is a Carolinian by adoption. He has no relatives in Georgia at the present time, but has several in South Carolina.

Judge Gantt served as a city magistrate from 1905 until 1917 and then was appointed United States Commissioner in Spartanburg, serving in this capacity for ten years, when he resigned in 1927 “because it got to where the job didn't pay anything.” 5 Judge Gantt believes that he is the only living person in Spartanburg, and perhaps elsewhere,

who, as a youth, saw and talked to Jefferson Davis, who later became President of the Confederacy, and Alexander Stephens, who became Vice President of the Confederacy. He was eleven years of age when these two Southern leaders visited with his father in their Georgia home. Thomas Wilding Gantt, of Lowndesville, S.C., who was the grandfather of Judge Gantt, was a Major in the brigade of General Robert Toombs, of Georgia, during the War Between the States.

Judge Gantt was married to Dr. L. Rosa Hirschman, of Charleston, and this union lasted for almost twenty years until the death of Dr. Gantt about three years ago. Mrs. Gantt was a remarkable woman, especially in view of the fact that women doctors were not looked upon so favorably in a town the size of Spartanburg. Nevertheless, she won national recognition in her practice, specializing in the eye, ear, nose and throat. At one time she was president of this branch of the American Medical Association. Her personal charm and her ability won for her leadership in women's club activities in Spartanburg. Since the death of Mrs. Gantt, Judge Gantt has called himself the “chief cook and bottle washer.”

To say the least, Judge Gantt is a unique character, and while his dress and mannerisms may not appeal to the masses, his ability as a lawyer is respected by all members of the bar. Without knowing, one would never suspect Judge Gantt, on first acquaintance, to be a lawyer. He is far from immaculate in his dress; and his hat, like his suit, shows unmistakable signs of having survived many winters. He has three complete suits, and all equally worn out. He goes to and from his office to his home, located in the mountains near Tryon, N.C., in an automobile he purchased for $25 in 1925. He insists to friends who have tried to prevail upon him to buy 6 another car, that he does not need one, despite the fact that it requires about an hour and thirty minutes for him to travel the twenty-five miles from his office to his home. The top of the car is half torn off, and in rainy weather one has to take the consequences.

“I just tell them I don't need another car, huh? This one serves my needs. It gets me back and forth, and that's all I want it for, huh? I could purchase another car, but there's lots more years in this car yet, huh?”

The largest fee Judge Gantt ever collected was $1,000, and the smallest, $1.

“The first case I ever tried,” said the Judge, “was on the very first day I opened my law office. A negro was charged with being disorderly, and while in jail, employed me to represent him. He had a one dollar bill, and gave it to me, asking me to do all I could for the dollar in his behalf. Well, I told the court a sob story for that boy, of how his mother needed him at home, as he was an only child, and of this being his first offense. I almost got to believing it myself, I made it so real. And the court fell for my line, and [the?] boy was given his freedom. I had won my first case and made my first dollar as a lawyer. The thousand dollar fee I made was for handling a land case in the county court during the World War period.

“In my years service as a magistrate, and in observing cases that have come before others, I have noted that a magistrate is pretty close to humanity, so to speak. He is called upon to make decisions in all manner of cases.

“One of the truest men I ever knew, and who a few years ago died in Spartanburg, served as a deputy sheriff in Spartanburg County as a young man. While I was a magistrate he often would come and sit with me, telling me of his experiences as a young deputy. He told me that the hardest official act he ever had to perform was to take charge of a white child that was being 7 raised and cared for by a Negro mother. It seemed that same young white girl had gone wrong and, leaving home, threw herself upon the mercy of an old mammy that had largely reared her. The girl gave birth to a baby, and was “grannied” and protected by the Negro woman. To protect her from shame, the Negro mother kept the secret and pampered the child, keeping it immaculately clean and neatly dressed. She had several small children herself, and the little white girl was being reared just as one of the

family. The neighbors, however, began to gossip, and finally the condition of affairs was brought to the attention of the law.

“The magistrate in question, who served years before I did, could find no law covering the case. It was before the days of the juvenile court act, but it was decided that something must be done, so my friend was deputized to go out and see if he could persuade the Negro woman to turn the child over to him. When approached, the Negro woman became hysterical. She declared it was her child, that she had nursed it, reared it and loved the child, and that she would not give it up because she held it in trust. She flatly refused to disclose the parentage or the history of the infant. She sent for her husband, and he declared that they could only take that child out of the house over his dead body.

“After making his report to the magistrate, and a conference with the people in the neighborhood was held, the magistrate decided that the court owed a duty to the State to see that this white child was not reared as a Negro. The magistrate issued an order to his deputy to seize the child. The constable declared that while he questioned the right of the magistrate to issue such an order, he felt it his duty to carry it out. The child was situated in a cabin at the end of a long lane, and as he drove down to the house he noted the Negro husband working in the barn and said nothing to him. He reached the cabin, told the Negro woman 8 that he had come for the child, and had papers for the infant. The Negro gathered the infant in her arms and uttered a scream. The officer noted her husband running down the lane with a pitch fork. My friend said that he turned and ran to the door and, as the Negro came up, he covered him with his gun; that the expression on the Negro's face was one of terrified determination and that he pleaded with the Negro to stop and listen to reason. He felt every minute that he would have to use his weapon, but the Negro paused, and he commenced to appeal to him, finally stepping out of the way and letting him join his wife in the room. He then commenced to plead with the two of them, reading the order of the court to them, and telling them that he would be forced to do his duty. The man weakened and commenced to plead with his wife. My friend told ne

that he was patient, determined and deeply moved in sympathy for the Negro woman in her affection for the child. Both the man and woman were in tears.

“Then, ny friend said, as the sun began to sink in the west, the officer gently prized the arms of the weeping Negro woman apart, took the crying white child in his arms, and backed out of the door. He heard the Negro woman fall to the floor with a thud, but drove away without looking back. He said that as he drove up the hill, he heard someone calling, and stopped. The Negro man came running up with tears in his eyes, and said: 'Boss, it's hard, but I reckon it's for the best. But I do think the county ought to pay me something for what we've done for that child. It has nearly killed the old woman to give it up.' The deputy asked the Negro how much he thought he was entitled to., and said that the Negro replied: 'Well, I think it's worth as much as ten dollars. You know, we have kept the child almost four years.'

“My friend said that the county paid the ten dollars to the Negro gladly. The little girl was put in the proper environment, and the incident was closed.” 9 In sharp contrast to the shabby appearance of his office, is the home of Judge Gantt, nestled in the Carolina mountains near Tryon, which is a picture of contentment and peacefulness. From the main highway, just beyond Tryon, you turn to the left and continue up a winding dirt road for about a mile until you reach “Liberty Hall,” which Judge Gantt calls his home place. The two-story frame structure is situated on a hill right in the heart of the mountains, and the picture from the flower garden looking towards the mountains, is one for an artist to paint. Many years ago Judge and Mrs. Gantt built this home in the mountains.

The front door of “Liberty Hall” opens into a spacious living room where, during the winter months, a log fire is burning. All modern conveniences are available, even to a hot air furnace in the basement, which Judge Gantt has not fired up since his wife's death. There is no telephone, but, as Judge Gantt says, “I don't want one here, for when I get home I want to forget the court room and my clients, huh?”

To the left of the living room is the dining room, and to its right, the kitchen, which has a frigidaire. His water is supplied from a well that he helped to dig himself, and the water is always cool.

French doors in the living room open into Judge Gantt's library, where he has a large number of valuable books and personal papers of his father. He has a first edition of poems by Robert Burns, which is valuable to any collector, and other books that would bring him hundreds of dollars were they placed on sale. He has some of the original manuscripts of Henry W. Grady, the crusading Georgia editor of a generation ago, who was a favorite of both Judge Gantt and his father when they resided in Georgia, and when the Judge knew as a young man while attending the University of Georgia. He will sit and reminisce for hours on Grady, Toombs, Stephens, Davis, Tom Watson, Eli Whitney, Ben Tillman, and many others who made history in the years past. 10 The upstairs has four bed rooms and two bath rooms and three large closets. There is one room that no one but himself is permitted to enter. It is the bed room that was used by Mrs. Gantt. Everything is just as she left it. Judge Gantt stopped the clock on her mantel at the very minute and hour of her death—-3:48.

Each day, after Judge Gantt leaves for his office in Spartanburg, the house is cleaned by a woman who, with her husband and two children, live in a home which Judge Gantt built in the rear of his place. The husband acts as caretaker of the twenty-three acres which the Judge owns in the mountains.

The Judge does his own cooking, and when he has invited guests, talks boastingly of his preparation of the meals. And all who have sat at his dinner table come away praising his culinary ability. His Sunday dinner, for example, may consist of the following: broiled ham, two inches thick, with gravy; boiled irish potatoes; baked sweet potatoes; carrots and peas; rice, tomatoes and celery, and hot biscuits and coffee. His Sunday breakfast is served at about 10 o'clock, and dinner at about 4 o'clock. If, before bed time, you feel the need of additional foods the Judge will offer you swiss cheese, rye bread and coffee. In the

morning you will be served with scrambled eggs, toast and coffee, and if you desire, grape fruit.

After the evening meals unless he has company, Judge Gantt enjoys the solitude of his library, where he will continue work on a book he is writing. He thinks he will give it the title, “A History of Upper South Carolina.” He has been working on this book for two years, he says. He hopes to finish it during the next few months. He hopes, also, to prepare a book on the Spartanburg bar similar to Judge O'Neall's Bench and Bar of South Carolina; and toward this purpose he has accumulated a mass of material. He might find embarrassment if required to write a three-figure check on short notice; but he can always give a guest a warm welcome, a comfortable bed, 11 and a good meal; and he can always answer an intelligent question about the county of Spartanburg.

Such is Judge Robert Joseph Gantt, respected member of the Spartanburg bar, a Tillmanite to the end, a country gentleman, and an author with perception and insight.